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Introduction: Populism, Religion and Social Policy

In the Global North, the 2010s witnessed political shifts towards the populist right, as evidenced by the rise of populist right-wing parties and their greater participation in national governments. Well-rehearsed examples include the 2016 election of Donald Trump to the White House, the 2016 leave vote in the United Kingdom (UK), the election of previously right-wing political parties across Europe such as in Austria, Greece, Hungary, Italy, and Poland. As noted by many observers, we are at a time when the high ideals associated with the welfare states (social protection from cradle to grave and universal citizenship rights) are under assault not only by the forces of neo-liberalism and the legacy of austerity but a new force potentially capable of unleashing even more damage: a parochial, anti-immigrant, welfare chauvinist, so-called “post-truth” disposition (Speed and Mannion, 2017).

Reflecting the above, populism has quickly occupied the writings of European scholars and expert observers as a mostly negative or regressive concept whilst other perspectives that study the potentially emancipatory elements of populism and indeed the different forms it takes in non-Western societies remain largely neglected. Hence, the aim of this themed section is to refine and expand the existing body of knowledge around populism and social policy by aiming first of all to consider different regional perspectives across the world but also to address the close relationship to religion, which is itself a key social and political factor that can both stoke and abate the flames of populist and anti-establishment sentiment (for an overview of the literature on religion and social policy see Pavolini, Béland and Jawad, 2017).

Often overlooked in the contemporary social policy literature, religion remains relevant to the workings of the welfare state and the ever-increasing emphasis on the voluntary sector worldwide. Since the beginning of the Covid-19 global crisis in early 2020, for instance, both public health and social assistance systems have relied on a combined effort between state services and a large number of lay volunteers and their organizations, many of whom are religiously or spiritually motivated to help provide essential survival items to the poor and vulnerable (such as medicine, food and essential supported living support). Yet, both during crises and in normal times, , religiously-motivated actors both in the voluntary sector and the worlds of business and politics provide welfare services but often also use their agency to influence the course of social policy and therefore, contribute directly to the resources that states across the globe have at their disposal to provide social protection to citizens and residents.

Furthermore, although much has been written about secularization, religion remains a key issue in many social policy areas such as education, family policy, health care, and abortion policy. The influence of religion on social policy formulation is expressed through social values in society, the role of religious actors whether they are clerical or lay in nature and, perhaps most significantly, through religious institutions that ask public authority to comment on the social issues of the day.

The present themed section has a double focus. First, it aims to take stock and advance scholarship on the role of religion in social policy and, more generally, to promote the development of historically-informed approaches to welfare state stability and change that take into account the changing role of major social institutions such as religion time. In this regard, the themed section includes papers that study the role of faith-based organizations, political parties, family values, and structures, and issues of path-dependency and incremental yet transformative social and policy change. Moreover, the themed section is interested in analyses of the religion-social policy nexus in North America and Europe, given the fact that there are new dynamics and trends at stake, but it also incorporates contributions studying this nexus in the Global South.

Second, this themed section highlights a relatively more recent yet important socio-political phenomenon: the diffusion of a *populist approach, especially on the right of the political spectrum* (Hall and Midgley, 2004) with respect to the formulation of social policies. This approach contrasts with the *state-led* and *market-led approaches* in that it prioritises local, traditional, and nationalist values of “the people”, often taking on anti-establishment and anti-immigrant tones (Hall and Midgley, 2004). The populist turn has also hindered the commitment to evidence-based public policy in the view of some observers due to its affinity with post-truth or “fake news” (Speed and Mannion, 2017). Interest in the analysis of populism increased dramatically in the Global North following the 2008 financial crisis, when liberal democracies (mainly in Europe and North America) experienced a surge in nationalistic and right-leaning political sentiments due to rising social inequalities and a sense of political disenfranchisement from the globalist capitalist mainstream. There is in the social sciences an increasing amount of research published on populism and related issues (the rise of radical right parties), and a new literature on social policy and populism is emerging.

From this perceptive, this special issue explores the policy implications of populism from a social policy angle by giving emphasis to concepts and trends that resonate with social policy scholarship. For example, the extent to which the populist influence on social policies around the world enhances or prohibits access to public services and the respect of human rights and dignity. To offer a critical and comparative perspective on these issues, the papers in this themed section deal with the following topics.

First, the state-of-the-art article provides an overview of this field of study and suggests that populism should also be studied as a form of political activism that expresses the grievances of excluded or disenfranchised populations. This is also evident from the historical record of non-Western societies.

Second, in their article, Kettell and Kerr explore the role of populism in mobilising support for Britain’s withdrawal from the European Union by focusing on a key feature of populist politics – the use of religious discourses and tropes. This article addresses this gap by exploring how the Leave campaign drew on quasi-religious themes and mythologies to frame Brexit as a form of national salvation, enabling Britain to realise its historic destiny as a global, free-trading nation freed from European servitude.

Third, Haustein and Tomalin’s article examines the SDG framework as a political project in tension with its universal and multilateral aspirations to serve as a counterbalance to narrow populist visions increasingly dominating global politics. Building upon Laclau and Mouffe’s theory of populism and their notion of ‘radical democracy’, we conceptualise the SDGs as a struggle for hegemony and in competition with other styles of politics, over what counts as ‘development’.

Fourth, Peker’s article traces the impact of *Front national* (FN) on the transformation of mainstream French narratives of *laïcité* since 1989, with particular attention to education policy. It argues that the FN’s systematic securitisation of Islam as a threat to the nation facilitated the reframing of *laïcité* as a Republican defence mechanism, operating primarily through the school system.

~~Fifth, Segatto and colleagues’ contribution on Brazil shows how education policy has changed in the last few decades due to the increasing prominence of Pentecostal and Neopentecostal groups, which formed a coalition enabling the election of a right-wing populist President.~~

Finally, Pavolini and colleagues show how the Italian Catholic Church changed over time its position toward social assistance and migration policies and at a time of increasing aversion towards migrants, it has become one of the few core actors in Italian society advocating explicitly for more welcoming migration policies and criticising national governments, especially the populist ones.

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